

ISA BLUMI, *Chaos in Yemen: Societal Collapse and the New Authoritarianism*, Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies (London: Routledge, 2010). Pp. 208. \$125.00 cloth, \$125.00 e-book.

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Isa Blumi's inquiry into the historical and contemporary dynamics of state–society relations in Yemen could hardly be more timely given scholarly and policy interest in the antecedents of Yemen's current revolutionary movement. Blumi's creative and thoughtful account makes the most of his historian's eye by reading the contemporary encroachments of 'Ali 'Abd Allah Salih's regime, and resistance to it, in light of analogous past efforts at the consolidation of power, primarily in the late Ottoman period. This approach is commendable, as is Blumi's unwavering commitment to the moral dimensions of studying and analyzing Yemeni politics, a commitment made all the more pressing in light of current circumstances. Blumi rightfully worries about the material consequences of reductionist categories and misleading conceptual frameworks at work in recent efforts to better understand Yemen and Yemenis. This concern is particularly urgent given the ways in which these categories of knowledge—such as “failed state” or “tribal state”—find their way into discussions among Yemeni politicians and activists themselves, who are avid consumers of policy literature issued in Washington and London. Blumi's critique of blunt and morally problematic efforts by outsiders to “map” conflicts in Yemen is thus an essential reminder of the real-world consequences of knowledge production, even if his critique is somewhat undifferentiated in its application.

The book is divided into five main chapters, the first two of which are devoted to Blumi's theoretical concerns and critiques. The historical analysis, which is particularly rich, unfolds in subsequent chapters alongside a discussion of Republican-era and postunification concerns. Blumi avoids a rigidly chronological (or even spatial) ordering, instead articulating a series of thematic questions on which historical and contemporary material are brought to bear, often explicitly in tandem. This organizational decision foregrounds his claims in regard to the mutual imbrications of Yemen's history and present but may pose a challenge for those who are unfamiliar with the basic contours of the past century and a half in Southern Arabia and in the broader region.

Throughout his analysis, Blumi is concerned with the ways in which local practices and interests mediate state authority, at times fortifying and at other times challenging the state's ability to govern. He places particular emphasis on the importance of local material practices and on the interests that they generate. For Blumi, shifting political coalitions and attachments are best understood largely (perhaps exclusively) as efforts to protect these microlevel material interests. In illustrating this, Blumi argues that the challenges faced by Salih today issue as echoes of the past. He concludes, for example, that

new quasi-religious political or economic associations erected around individuals (Hūthi and Shaj'i today, Idrīsī in the past) reflect a real ability among many emergent leaders to protect local interests. Subsequent heavy-handed efforts to suppress these reactive gestures from locals vis-à-vis state authority inevitably lead to a chain reaction that the Sālīh regime (like the Imam, Ottomans, Saudis and the United States) cannot (and could not) fully control (p. 115).

Blumi's historical materialist framework is particularly convincing in some instances—as for example in his discussion of disruptions accompanying the demarcation of the Yemeni–Saudi border in 2000 and the resistances that it has elicited—but it tends to efface the possibility of ideational commitments existing alongside and in concert with material grievances. As Lisa Wedeen reminds us, “what looks like the flow of capital, labor, and goods from the point

of view of analysts may look like internal moral decay and an assault on public virtue” to some (though not all) local agents (*Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008], p. 201). The material dimension of local practices, to which Blumi devotes careful attention, should be read as one important contributor to the making (and unmaking) of political attachments but perhaps without the analytic primacy he accords them.

If demonstrating the value of reading the present as/through the past is one of the central aims of the book, Blumi’s other objectives are to intervene in dominant discourses about social and political identity in Yemen and to highlight the contingent relationships between various communities of belonging and state power. Blumi offers an excellent account of the relationships between “colonial epistemologies,” which link blunt understandings of social and political identity to material practices of domination and violence (p. 13). He attributes this to the circulation of reductionist efforts to categorize, name, and know and locates the origins of this scholarly practice in “imperialist epistemologies that still permeate media and scholarly lexicons” (p. 14).

Although Blumi’s critique of categories of meaning exogenously imposed on fluid and complex Yemeni social practices is commendable, it is hampered by one of the book’s greatest weaknesses: the author’s uncertainty (or at least imprecision) regarding his audience and the object(s) of his ire. For those who have devoted much time to the study of Yemen, Blumi’s critique of colonial epistemologies builds upon well-established arguments in the scholarly literature, particularly those of several anthropologists and ethnographically inclined scholars from other disciplines (several of whom he cites favorably) who recognize the vital importance of what Blumi calls “micropolitics” as well as the fluid and contingent relationship between identities and interests.

Few scholars of Yemen would disagree with Blumi’s call to challenge “complacent discourses on ‘tribalism,’ regionalisms and sectarianism” (p. 145), so one is left to wonder who he is really addressing. Is it the regional specialist of an outdated Orientalist tradition? Or more likely, is it the social scientist who feels tempted to “dip in” to discussions of Yemen on the basis of recent developments in order to map the country onto “generalizable claims” about state building and violence? In other words, one can surely recognize the problems that Blumi identifies without accepting his claim that “scholarship” on Yemen remains central to the proliferation of the colonial epistemologies and conceptual reductionism that constitute his primary concern. Indeed, for a scholar sensitive to the work done by categorization, it is surprising to see how smoothly Blumi shifts his attention from (largely unnamed) scholars to policy analysts to journalists without varying his argument.

Reductionist language and the quest to know—and thereby master—Yemen through mental (and sometimes cartographic) mapping is indeed deplorable and relies upon the durability of imperialist epistemologies to which some men and women of letters have undoubtedly contributed. Flattening descriptions that reduce complex and contingent processes such as identity formation and interest articulation to “tribes and sects” are not only reductive but also circular, insofar as the application of ahistorical categories contributes to making what these labels seek to describe and explain. Unfortunately, Blumi’s book, which seems to have been written mainly for an academic audience that shares his theoretical critique, may not be accessible to the very people who would benefit most immediately from it. This is particularly true of the policy analysts who not only contribute to the circulation of problematic categories but also to the shaping of decisions that provoke the very material consequences that (justifiably) concern Blumi. Despite all of this, readers certainly stand to benefit from Blumi’s careful historical analysis of the dialect relationships between local, state, and imperial power in the late Ottoman period and from his efforts to put this analysis to use in untangling the dynamics of Salih’s regime today.